

Archaeological Sites on Port Meadow, Oxford

By R. J. C. ATKINSON

THE nineteen sites described below all lie on Port Meadow, a large flat grazing-ground of some 300 acres, which lies immediately to the NW. of Oxford between the Great Western Railway and the River Thames (FIG. 3, inset). The subsoil is flood-plain gravel, and is covered by 1 ft. of top soil and turf; the surface is flat, and lies 2 ft. above the summer level of the river; in winter it is frequently flooded.

The sites were photographed from the air by the late Major G. W. G. Allen during the summer of 1933, and were located and surveyed on the ground between May, 1940, and September, 1942. The most prominent of them, Round Hill (FIG. 3, site 3), has long been known as an antiquity, and appears to have been opened at some time; during the summer of 1940 excavations¹ were carried out by the Oxford University Archaeological Society on sites 5, 6, and 9 (FIG. 5), the results of which are described in detail below (p. 30).

These sites are remarkable, first for their excellent state of preservation, which reveals clearly features of construction which can only be inferred on similar sites in the more cultivated districts round Oxford; and secondly, for their situation on ground close to the river, which at the present day cannot be inhabited on account of annual floods.

THE AIR-PHOTOGRAPHS (PLS. I-III)

The photographs described below should be compared with the detailed plans given in FIG. 4.

PL. I shows part of the E. side of Port Meadow, looking NNE. Across the centre is the hedge and stream which divides the Meadow from the fields adjoining the railway. Close to this hedge are, from left to right, the circular ditches of sites 4, 2, and 1; in front of the last can be seen the mound of Round Hill, overlapping the nearer side of the circular platform-barrow ditch. Two foot-paths cross the foreground from left to right; a little to the right of Round Hill the lower one is crossed obliquely by a short stretch of straight ditch.

¹ My thanks are due to the Sheriff and Freemen of the City of Oxford for permission to excavate, to the Oxford University School of Forestry for the loan of surveying instruments, to Mr. E. T. Leeds and Mr. D. B. Harden for much helpful advice, and to my wife for identifying several of the sites on the ground, and for great assistance in surveying them.

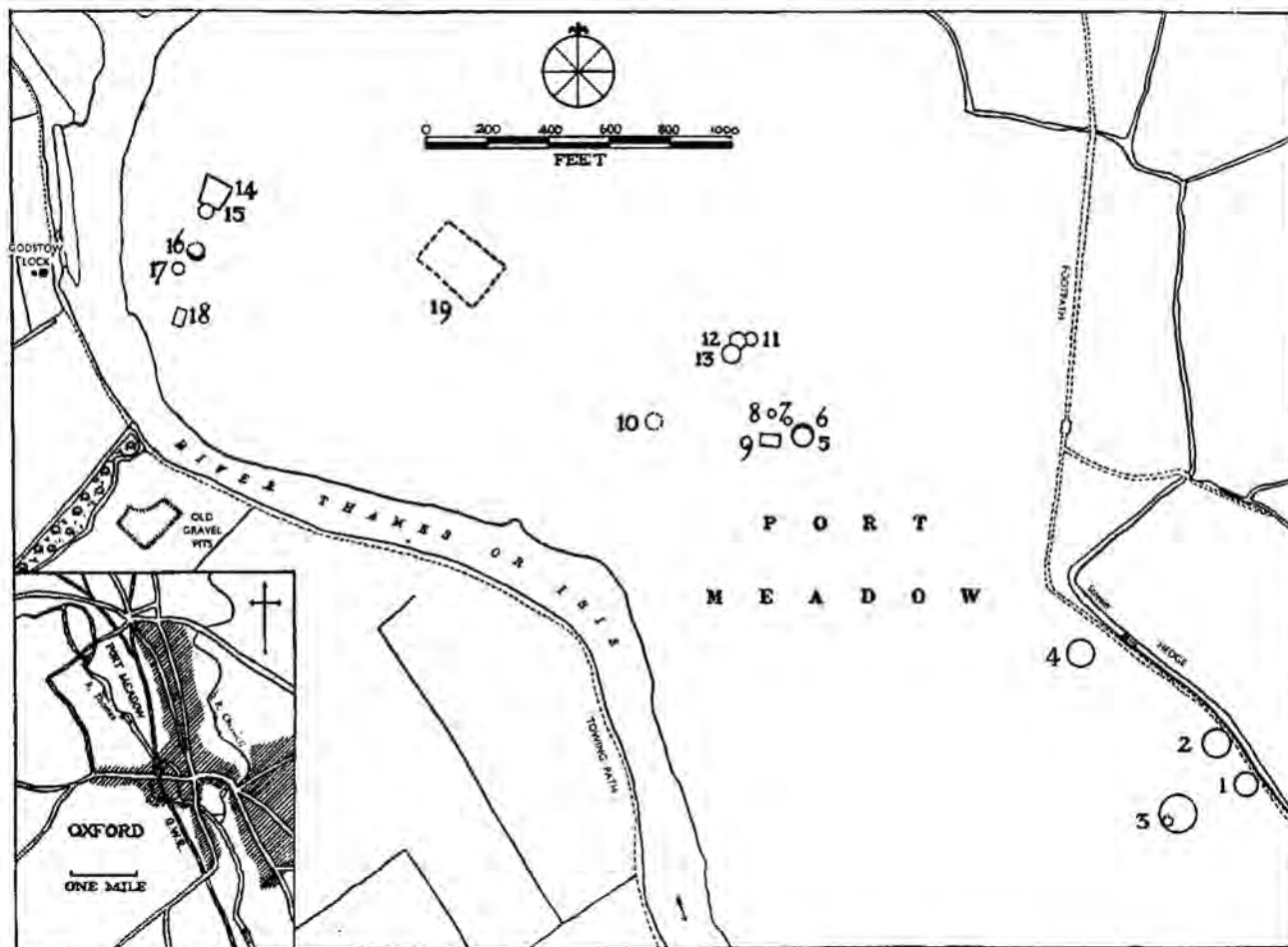


FIG. 3

MAP OF A PORTION OF PORT MEADOW, OXFORD, SHOWING SITES 1-19.

The inset shows the position of Port Meadow in relation to the city of Oxford.

Based on the Ordnance Survey maps with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

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PL. II shows the centre of the Meadow, looking NE. In the foreground is a bend of the River Thames; on the left, a straight ditch runs towards the centre and makes a right-angled bend to the river; in the centre, an old water-course, crossed by a causeway, curves obliquely away from the river. In the left centre is a well-marked circle (FIG. 3, site 10), with two small marks, almost certainly fungus marks, just to the right of it. The circle may well be a fungus mark also, as it is now quite invisible on the ground. Above this site the interlocking circular ditches of sites 13 and 12 show clearly, and immediately beyond them the ditch of site 11 can just be seen.

To the right of these is the rectangular ditch of site 9, and close to it, showing as a single circle, the ditches of sites 5 and 6. To the left of the latter are the two small barrows, sites 7 and 8.

The top right-hand corner of this photograph, where the ditch of site 4 can be seen, overlaps the left-hand side of PL. I.

PL. III shows the NW. corner of the Meadow, looking NE. In the foreground is the River Thames with Godstow Lock. Beyond, on the left, is the trapezoidal enclosure of site 14, overlapped on the S. side by a circle, site 15; the gap in the latter is not visible on the ground.

Further to the right the broad ditch of site 16 shows clearly as a circle, although it appears on the ground as an irregular crescent; to the right of it is the rectangular ditch of site 18. The third circle of this group, site 17 (FIG. 3), is scarcely visible on the photograph, although it is quite evident on the ground.

Running up from site 18 is a straight ditch, which is crossed by another to the right of site 14. Above this second ditch, further to the right, can be seen a large rectangular enclosure, site 19, while below it is another circle, almost certainly one of the large fungus rings which abound on this part of the Meadow. Neither this circle nor site 19 can be seen on the ground.

THE SITES (FIGS. 3 and 4)

The form and significance of these sites are discussed below. It must be understood that in the absence of evidence from excavation any suggestions as to their date or purpose will be purely speculative. Their general character, however, suggests that the majority, at least, are prehistoric.

Site 1. A circular ditch, 10 ft. wide, now almost filled, enclosing an area 70 ft. in diameter; the E. side now lies beneath a footpath. The enclosed area is quite flat and level with the surrounding Meadow; there is no trace of a central mound or of a bank.

Site 2. Similar to site 1. The ditch is about 8 ft. wide, and encloses an area 85 ft. in diameter.

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Site 3. This is apparently the only archaeological site on Port Meadow recognised prior to 1933; it is marked on the map as Round Hill. It consists

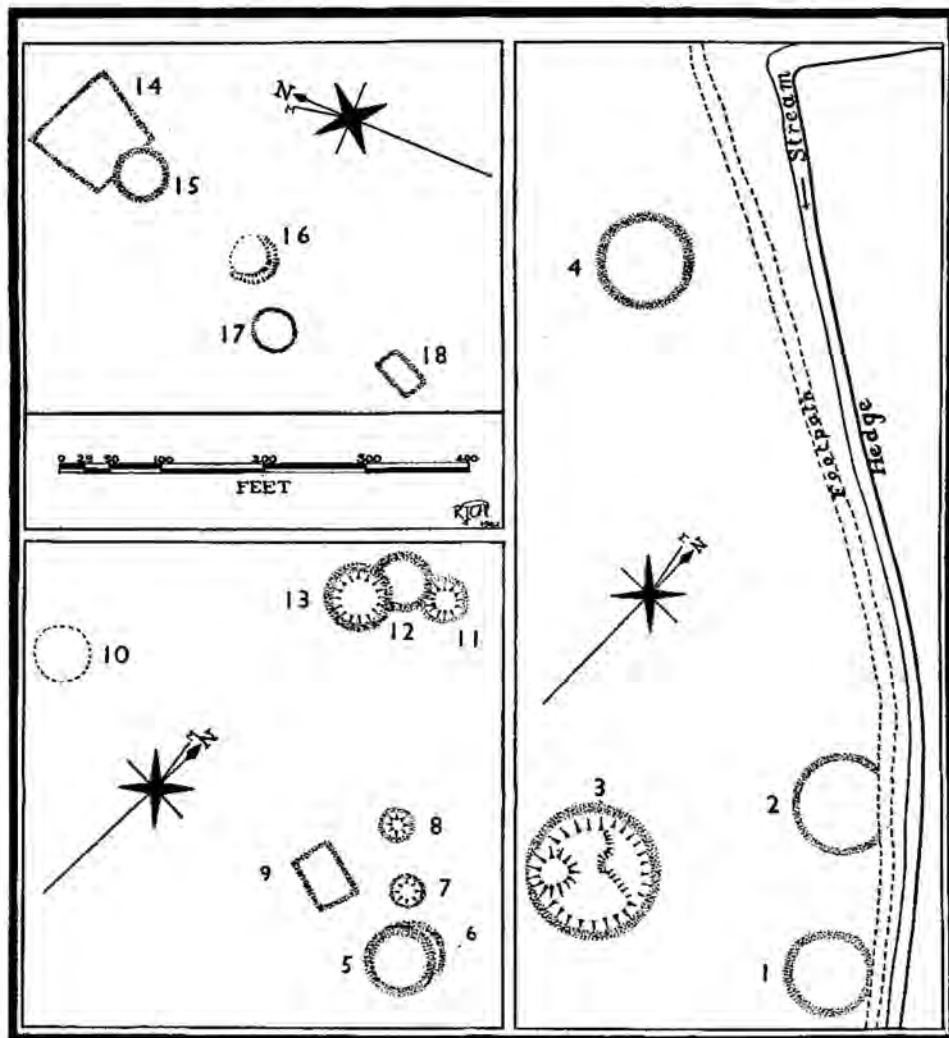


FIG. 4
PLANS OF SITES 1-4, 5-13, AND 14-18, PORT MEADOW, OXFORD.

A broken line indicates that the site was not found on the ground.

of a low irregular mound, $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft. high and 115 ft. in diameter, somewhat disturbed on the E. side. Round it is a circular ditch, which shows on the ground on the

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S. side only ; the complete circle has been proved by probing. Placed on the W. edge of this mound, and overlapping the ditch, is a second, smaller mound, some 45 ft. in diameter, with steep sides rising to a height of 4 ft. above the surface of the Meadow. At the top is a small crater, traces of a previous opening about which nothing is known.

It seems probable that the primary mound and the ditch together form a platform-barrow. The secondary mound appears to have been made by scraping up material from the opposite side of the barrow on which it stands. Its date and purpose are both unknown ; it may possibly have been made in recent times to enable owners of cattle grazing on the Meadow to inspect them from a distance ; it is certainly the only elevated point on the whole Meadow.

Site 4. A circular ditch, 11 ft. wide, enclosing a flat area 80 ft. across. The centre lies beneath a footpath, which has destroyed any trace of a central mound, if such ever existed ; there is no bank.

Sites 5 and 6. Both from the air and on the ground these sites appear as a single wide circular ditch, with a low broad external bank. Excavations during 1940, fully described below (p. 30), showed that there were two circular ditches, one overlapping the other. The finds suggest that they belong to the transition period between the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

Site 7. A small barrow, consisting of a low mound 30 ft. across and 6-9 ins. high, surrounded by a small ditch 3 ft. wide ; the ditch shows faintly on the air-photograph (PL. II), and was proved by probing.

Site 8. Another small barrow, similar in all respects to site 7.

Site 9. A rectangular enclosure, measuring 35 by 50 ft. The ditch, 6 ft. wide and 3 ft. deep, was completely silted up ; its position was marked by the greater growth of grass and thistles over it. A section cut across it in 1940 revealed a broad, flat-bottomed profile (FIG. 5). The filling was of uniform sticky brown loam ; there was no gravel silt on the bottom, nor was there any sign of the excavated gravel in the form of an internal or external bank. Comparison with the similar site 18 (p. 30), where the ditch was clearly marked within a low bank, suggests that the ditch of site 9 was intentionally filled up soon after it was dug, but with material other than that excavated from it.

The purpose of this enclosure is obscure. The rectangular sides suggest a foundation-trench for a masonry building, but no trace of masonry or even rubble was found in the section ; a wooden building is unlikely, as the section of the trench is unsuitable for retaining timbers. It has been suggested to me that it was a small enclosure for animals ; as such, it might be fit for sheep, but the ditch is not wide or deep enough to keep in cows, or the more agile goat ; moreover, the absence of gravel silting does not support this idea.

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Site 10. This circle is known only from the air-photograph (PL. II, p. 26), and cannot be found on the ground. It is probably a large fungus ring of particularly strong growth, which has died out since it was photographed from the air in 1933.

Site 11. A small round barrow, with a mound 12-15 ins. in height and 37 ft. in diameter. There is no trace of a ditch on the ground, but it is faintly visible on the air-photograph, and has been proved by probing.

Site 12. A circular ditch, some 11 ft. wide, enclosing a flat area 40 ft. in diameter, with a slight external bank. On the E. side this ditch cuts into, and is therefore later than, the adjacent site 11, the mound of which is noticeably higher at this point owing to the addition of later material. The surface appearance of this site is similar to that of sites 5 and 15.

Site 13. A circular ditch, about 12 ft. wide, with a broad low external bank; on the E. side it cuts into and overlaps the bank and ditch of site 12. The area enclosed by the ditch, 50 ft. in diameter, appears as a very slight mound, but this may be an optical illusion due to the width of the ditch, which would tend to throw the central area into relief. It has not yet been possible to remove this uncertainty by accurate contouring. The general character of this site, however, differs markedly from that of the adjacent site 12, where the central area is noticeably flat.

Site 14. A trapezoidal enclosure, the longest side measuring 89 ft. and the shortest 72 ft. The ditch, which is clearly visible on the ground, is about 4 ft. wide; there are no apparent gaps or entrances. On the S. side the ditch cannot be traced, as it has been cut into and overlaid by the ditch and bank of the adjacent site 15. The priority of the trapezoidal enclosure is clearly demonstrated.

Site 15. A circular ditch, about 9 ft. wide, with a slight external bank, enclosing a flat area 40 ft. across.

Site 16. On the ground this site appears as a well-marked semicircular ditch, sloping gently from the inside, and rising steeply on the outside to a very slight bank. It is about 2 ft. deep on the S. side, becoming shallower and finally fading out altogether on the E. and W. The air-photograph, however (PL. III), shows the ditch to be a complete circle, except for a possible gap on the E. side. It would seem that at some time the S. side of the enclosed area had been scraped up and dumped so as to fill up the northern half of the ditch.

Site 17. A circular ditch, 3 ft. wide, enclosing a perfectly flat area 38 ft. in diameter. It is only just visible on the air-photograph (PL. III), but is clearly visible on the ground. There is no trace of a bank, and the general character of the site is quite unlike that of the other circles on the Meadow.

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Site 18. A rectangular ditch, about 6 ft. wide, measuring 40 by 20 ft. with a low external bank. This site resembles site 9, although in the present case silting, as distinct from deliberate filling, seems to have taken place.

Site 19. A large rectangular enclosure; it is known only from the air-photograph (PL. III), and has not so far been found on the ground.

With the exception of the report on the excavation of sites 5 and 6 which follows, I omit any further discussion of the monuments described above, since, in the absence of any evidence from excavation, it would serve no useful purpose. It should be pointed out, however, that, so far as I know, these are the only antiquities of their kind which have not yet suffered, to a greater or less degree, at the hands of the ploughman and gravel-digger. They are therefore of more than usual importance, and it is to be hoped that they will be properly preserved, and made available, in due course, for full and scientific examination.

THE EXCAVATION OF SITES 5 AND 6

During May, 1940, sites 1-9 were identified on the ground with the help of air-photographs. It was then decided to excavate the whole group comprising sites 5-9; in the middle of June, however, very urgent archaeological rescue work had to be undertaken elsewhere, and the work on Port Meadow was stopped before the excavation of sites 5 and 6 was complete. It is thought worth while, however, to publish the results of the work, incomplete as they are, since it may be some time before these excavations can be resumed.

On the surface the sites appeared as a flat area about 50 ft. in diameter, sloping away on the outside to a broad silted ditch not more than 6 ins. deep. Outside this was a broad low bank merging gradually into the surrounding field. The surface was carefully contoured at a vertical interval of 0.1 ft.; this small interval was chosen owing to the very slight relief of the ground, the greatest rise and fall being only 1 ft. The contours revealed a distinct spreading of the bank on the N. side. Two sections (FIG. 5), 3 ft. wide, were cut diametrically across the circle, and a square was cleared in the centre. It soon became evident that there was not one circular ditch, as had been supposed, but two, the second overlapping and destroying about half the circumference of the first.

Only one complete section of the earlier ditch 6 was obtained (FIG. 5, D-D'); in the other cuttings it had been partially or completely destroyed by the later ditch 5, but enough remained in sections A-A' and C-C' to show that it enclosed an area about 68 ft. across. The ditch itself had a U-shaped section, 5 ft. wide and $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. deep. The filling was perfectly clean gravel, distinguishable

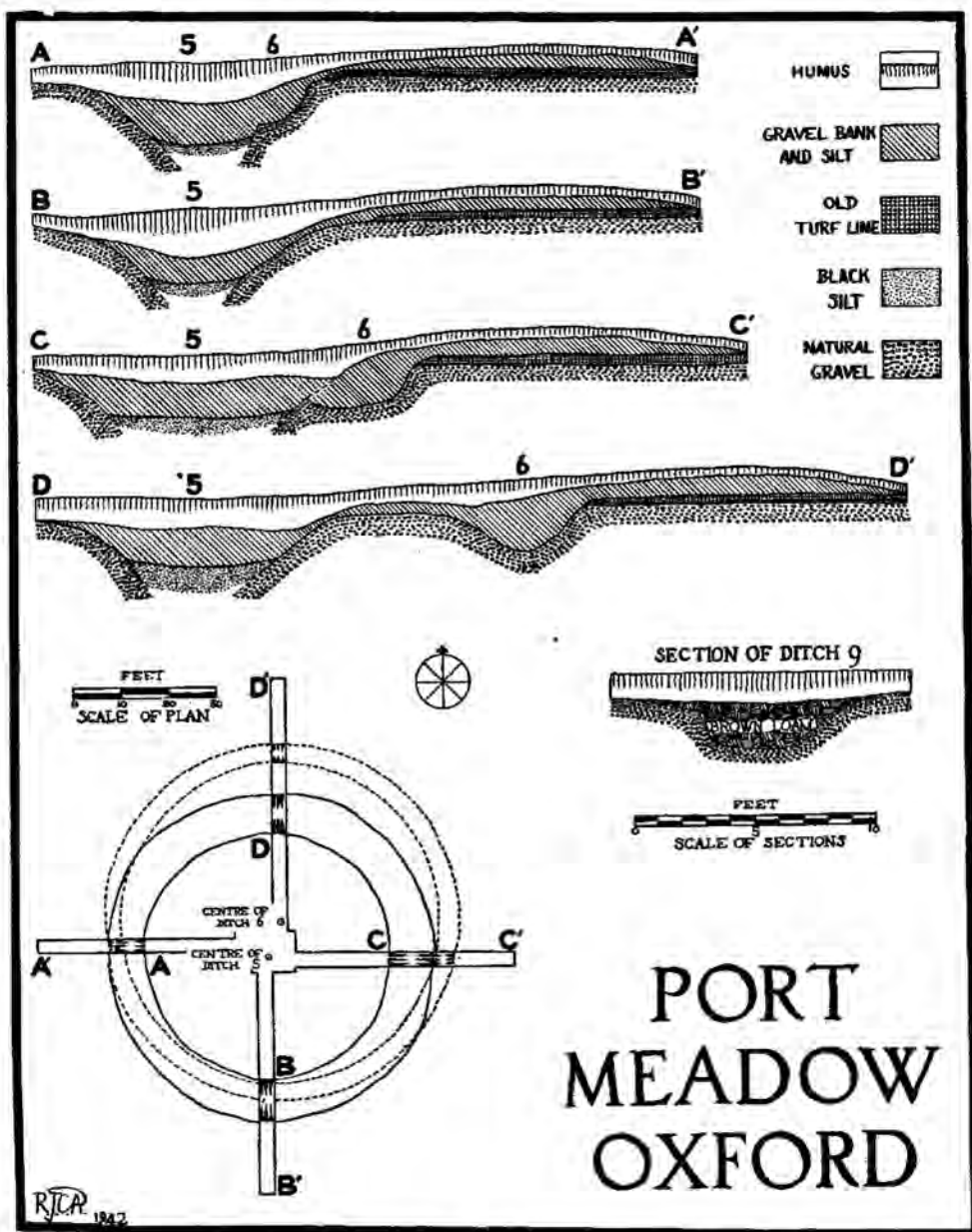


FIG. 5

PLAN AND SECTIONS OF SITES 5 AND 6, AND SECTION OF DITCH OF SITE 9.

The blue clay layer (p. 32), is not indicated on the sections.

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from the surrounding natural gravel only by its slightly lighter colour, due, no doubt, to exposure on the bank. The absence of any earthy silting, and the clean and uniform appearance of the filling, suggest that this ditch was purposely filled up soon after it was dug.

The only finds from this ditch were two sherds of pottery (p. 33, FIG. 6, nos. 1-2), 18 ins. deep in the filling in section D-D'. Both are of the coarse friable ware characteristic of the local Bronze Age; Mr. E. T. Leeds, who kindly examined them, considers them to be of the Late Bronze Age.

In the later ditch 5, water was found before the bottom was reached, making it impossible to obtain a complete section. It is clear, however, that the profile was V-shaped, but was subsequently eroded by exposure. In its original form it probably enclosed an area about 55 ft. in diameter.

The primary filling, all of which was below water level, consisted of black stony mud, which dried to a grey colour. The surface of this layer of silting was almost horizontal, and the whole had just the appearance of mud which had gradually formed in stagnant water filling the bottom of the ditch. This layer contained occasional bird bones, and a few very small fragments of pottery (p. 33, no. 5). The ware is fine and black in colour, the surface hard and smooth; it was impossible to determine the shape of any vessel, but the ware strongly suggests an Iron Age origin, and is certainly quite unlike any local Bronze Age pottery. The digging of ditch 5 is therefore assigned provisionally to the Iron Age.

Above the mud silting the ditch was filled with gravel, dirty and darker in colour than that in ditch 6, but not very earthy; this contained a number of animal bones, including those of cow and sheep, and two sherds of pottery (p. 33, FIG. 6, nos. 3-4), a few ins. from the top of the layer. The latter are of a sandy fabric different from the other two fabrics already encountered; the shape of one of them recalls an Iron Age AB form which is common in the district. It seems likely, therefore, that this ditch was well silted up within the Iron Age period.

Above the gravel silting was a layer of stiff blue clay, 6-9 ins. thick. This is said to have been put down during the war of 1914-1918, to fill up the rest of the ditch, when Port Meadow was prepared as an emergency landing-ground for aircraft. This report is without official confirmation, but presents a very reasonable explanation for this clay layer and is supported by the fact that the gravel immediately beneath the clay is stained a blue colour to a depth of only 2 ins.; had the clay been put down in ancient times this staining would probably have penetrated deeper. The absence of a turf-line between the clay and the gravel silting would be explained by the necessity of removing the turf in order subsequently to cover up the clay filling, which, if allowed to soften under

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exposure in this damp situation would soon present a dangerous obstacle.

Outside the ditch is a low bank of clean gravel, covering an old turf-line 6-9 ins. thick. No finds were made in either of these layers.

During the spring of 1942 a much corroded iron spearhead was picked up in the centre of this site, which has lately been trampled by cows. It is of a common Anglo-Saxon type, with short lozenge-shaped head and hollow split socket.

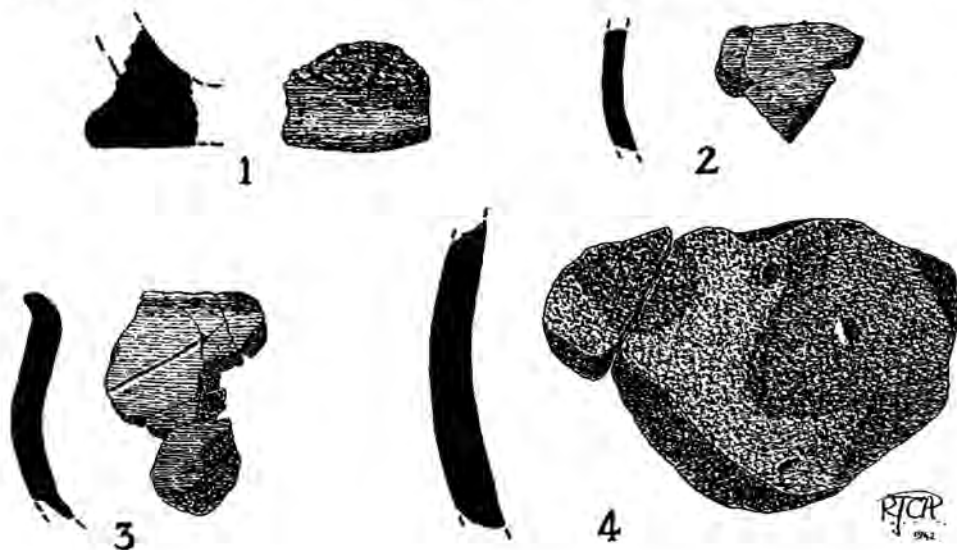


FIG. 6

POTTERY FROM SITES 5 AND 6, PORT MEADOW, OXFORD Sc. 1.

The Pottery (FIG. 6)

1. Middle filling, ditch 6, section D-D' (FIG. 5). Fr. base with horizontal foot-ring. Coarse greyish-brown fabric, with backing of crushed grit and tempering of grass or reeds. From a vessel of 'flower-pot' form (?) Probably Late Bronze Age.

2. Fabric, find-spot and date as no. 1.

3. Upper gravel silt, ditch 5, section A-A' (FIG. 5). Fr. bowl, small everted rim, decoration of burnished lines. Hard black sandy fabric, smooth outer surface, somewhat abraded. An Iron Age AB form, common locally. Cf. *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I, 253, fig. 12, lower half.

4. Upper gravel silt, ditch 5, section D-D' (FIG. 5). Thick sherd, very sandy black fabric, reddish on outside, somewhat abraded. Probably Iron Age.

5. Bottom, ditch 5, in muddy silt, section A-A' (FIG. 5). Fr. (too small to illustrate), fine hard black fabric, smooth surface. Probably Iron Age.

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Any conclusions regarding date drawn from this incomplete evidence must necessarily be tentative. It seems clear, however, that three periods can be distinguished on the site. To the first belongs the digging, and filling soon afterwards, of ditch 6, probably in the latter part of the Late Bronze Age; to the second belongs the digging on the same spot of ditch 5, probably soon after the arrival of an intrusive Iron Age group; while to the third period belongs the occupation of the now silted ditch, or some place close to it, by people using Iron Age AB pottery.

Ditch 6 belongs to a class of sites which has definite characteristics of its own. They consist usually of a single circular ditch, varying from 50 to 100 ft. in diameter, which encloses a flat central area almost always featureless. The ditch is either encircled by an external bank, or is filled in such a way as to suggest that an outer bank originally existed and has been subsequently thrown back.

It is suggested that the term 'ring-ditch' should be strictly reserved to designate this class of sites. Several examples were excavated by Stone at Standlake, one of which was intimately associated with a Late Bronze Age urnfield.¹ Others, for which there is no direct dating evidence, exist at Sutton Courtenay,² Dorchester-on-Thames (Mount Farm)³, Eynsham (Foxley Farm),⁴ Stanton Harcourt,⁵ and Cassington.⁶ It is probable also that many others of the circular ditches, which appear on Major Allen's air-photographs of the Oxford area, but are as yet unexplored, belong to the same class. One example has been excavated at Cassington⁷ with a double ditch; this may be a variant of the ring-ditch type, but it should be noted that other double circular ditches at Radley,⁸ North Stoke,⁹ and Stanton Harcourt¹⁰ were found to enclose burials; the Cassington site may possibly be an unused burial-place of the same type.

These ring-ditches should not be confused with circular ditches surrounding burials, such as those at Radley¹¹ and Clifton Hampden;¹² these may be either ploughed-down round barrows, or variants of the disc barrow type, although some of them, as Mr Leeds has suggested,¹³ may originally have had a domestic context, before being used as burial-places.

The later ditch 5 is structurally akin to these ring-ditches, but the presence in the primary silt of Iron Age pottery raises a fresh problem. Truly circular sites of Iron Age date are rare; none has so far been explored in the Oxford

¹ *Archaeologia*, xxxvii, 364 ff.

² *Ibid.*, lxxvi, 60.

³ *Oxoniensia*, ii, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vi, 85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, v, 162.

⁶ *V. infra*, p. 106.

⁷ *Oxoniensia*, i, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, i, 8, and *infra*, p. 103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, i, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, v, 162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, iii, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, i, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, i, 22.

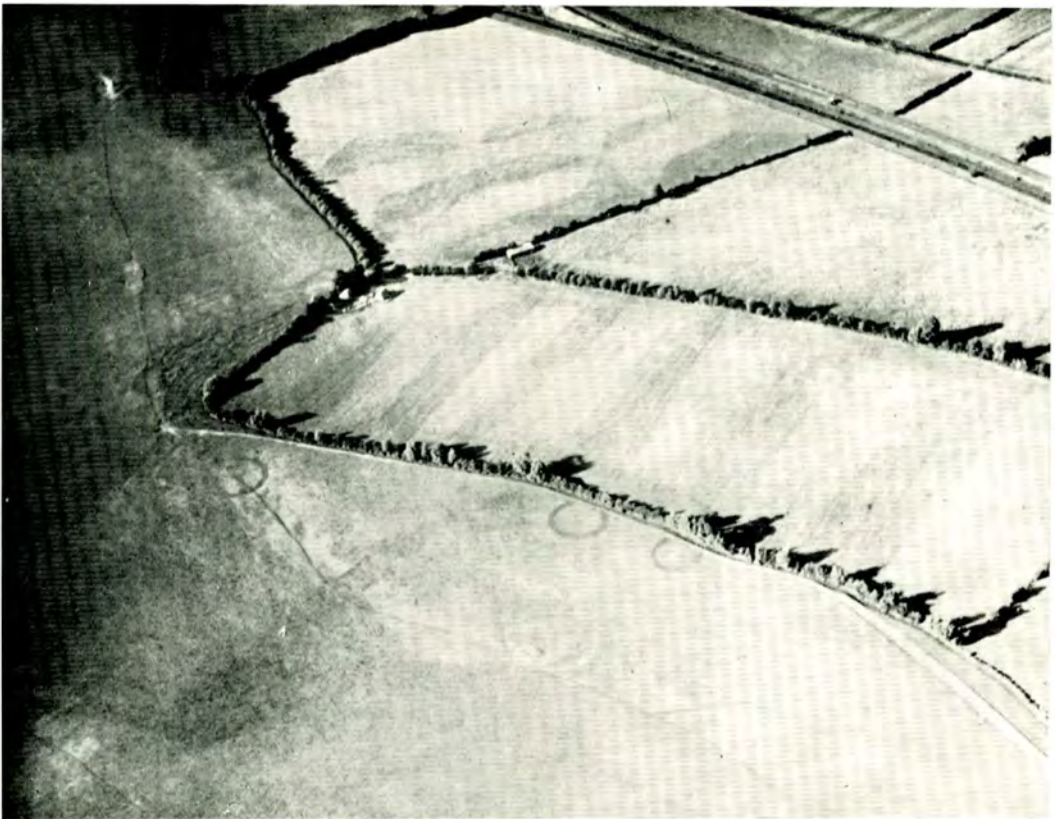
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district,¹ but there are several apparently circular ditches within the Dyke Hills enclosure at Dorchester-on-Thames, which is presumably Iron Age in date.² The position of the present site suggests that it may be an attempt to re-excavate the ring-ditch which it overlies. This implies a continuity of purpose, in which case ditch 5 might be a survival belonging culturally to the Late Bronze Age, rather than an original feature of the intrusive Iron Age culture. It is clear, however, that ditch 5 was dug when the site of the earlier ditch was still known, and both, therefore, fall within the same period, transitional between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age.

In short, the purpose of these ring-ditches is still obscure. The fact that many of them seem to have been intentionally filled up soon after they were dug suggests a ritual or ceremonial rather than a domestic use. In the present case it is tempting to associate the two ring-ditches with the two small barrows lying only a few yards from them, and to suppose that the flat area they enclose was used for some part of the burial rite, perhaps for the exposure of the corpse. It must be understood, however, that this is mere hypothesis, and hitherto no such association of ring-ditch and barrow has been recorded elsewhere.

¹ The late Iron Age 'circular' enclosure at Mount Farm (*Oxoniensia*, II, 21) is an oval, not a true circle.

² *Oxoniensia*, III, 170, pl. xviii, fig. 20.



THE E. SIDE OF PORT MEADOW, OXFORD, LOOKING NNE., SHOWING SITES 1-4 (p. 24).

Ph. the late Major G. W. G. Allen.



THE CENTRE OF PORT MEADOW, OXFORD, LOOKING NE., SHOWING SITES 5-13 (p. 26).

Ph. the late Major G. W. G. Allen.



THE NW. CORNER OF PORT MEADOW, OXFORD, LOOKING NE., SHOWING SITES 14-18 (p. 26)

Ph. the late Major G. W. G. Allen